

Views From Our Readers

Here are some of the letters, messages and notes we've received from readers and viewers. We appreciate hearing from you by Canada Post: Escarpment Views, 50 Ann St., Georgetown ON L7G 2V2 or email: editor@EscarpmentViews.ca

Hi: I just read your Escarpment views and did enjoy the photography. Please pass along to Melissa Prout: I had to chuckle when I read that on the Bruce Peninsula, most people will never see one because of its secretive behaviour and incredible camouflage. I grew up on the peninsula, encountered many rattlesnakes (we used to have a jar of rattles - as they were constantly in bails of hay, in hay mows, or along the sides of the house, we had to kill to protect ourselves) My mom recently killed one in her flower bed along hwy 6, and I went for a three-hour hike last summer, and took pictures of eight, so they are not that extinct. In fact, they are dangerously populating the area, to be putting people at risk. Where there is one, there is always a second! or its mate, so I have first hand experience that there are lots out there! Hope you don't get bit! /

Pat [By email]

[Editor's note: Here is a response to Pat's email from Melissa Prout.]

Dear Pat,

Wow! You are certainly fortunate to have had so many encounters with this amazing snake! We are privileged to live in one of only two areas in Canada with healthy populations. I understand that it is a bit

disconcerting to have a rattlesnake appear where you aren't expecting it, such as in your garden; however, there are alternatives to killing it. These rattlesnakes can be relocated up to 250 metres away by using a long stick to gently move it into an empty garbage can. Like most wild animals that we come across, the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake is actually quite frightened of us. Its instincts are just like yours – self defence – striking only when provoked. There have been no deaths due to rattlesnake bites in Ontario in over 45 years. Statistically, you are far more likely to be hit by lightning or killed in a car accident.

I would remind you that the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake is a species at risk and is protected under both federal and provincial legislation. This means that it is illegal to harass or kill them or even have any part of one (such as the rattle) in your possession. They play an important ecological role and our world would be far poorer without them. Persecution by humans has significantly contributed to the "threatened" status of these impressive snakes. However, attitudes are now changing to wonderment and stewardship; and I'm glad to hear



that you are now taking photos of these snakes! Good luck in your future hikes on the Bruce Peninsula!

Melissa Prout

[Editor's note: Susan Gibson was asked to put the following in writing for us after her telephone call about it.]

Pregnant Massasauga rattlesnakes have one job. They must keep their average of eight snake embryos close to 31 degrees for THREE months of gestation. To do this, in the Bruce National Park, they return to and reuse the same limestone rocks and crevices where they thermoregulate and can escape, if threatened. Since the last Ice Age, these ancient birthing sites have allowed the moms to warm up on a sunlit slab of limestone in the morning, after sheltering under the same rock for nightly warmth. Nearby, there will usually be a small cedar tree which will provide moderate warmth, dappled light during the warmer parts of the day and visual protection for this cryptic and unique creature. And, amazingly, the mums FAST during the entire pregnancy, and do not move much more than a metre in any direction - unless a mouse or some other snake delicacy moves within easy striking distance. Like most other pit-vipers, mums stay around for their natal care for six to 10 days until the babies shed their first skin. How do we know these facts about Massasaugas? Because of their rareness. For several years the scientific staff of the Bruce Peninsula National Park initiated summer surveys and identified many unknown (to us) birthing sites within the park. These are now closely monitored to prevent interaction between park visitors during the birthing cycle.

When I lived in Tobermory I was privileged to be invited to join the Park's Massasauga scientific team as a volunteer. What an experience! You haven't lived till you have seen a ball of newborn rattlesnakes.

Susan Gibson, Ottawa